

By Sani Garba Mohammed

## **Being the address of the Environmental Health Forum of Nigeria at the School of Hygiene, Kano.**

Environmental health addresses all the physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, AND all the related factors impacting behaviours; encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors that can potentially affect health, and is targeted towards preventing disease and creating health supportive environments.

IT IS recognized that the continuing threats to human health posed by pollution, climate change, urbanisation, globalisation and poverty, and the urgent need to adopt a preventive approach so as to maintain and improve the quality of the natural environment, air, water, food, housing and communities in order to reduce the impact of disease and the public health IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE, AND THAT the services provided by environmental health professionals heightens the visibility, worth and significance of environmental health to the general public, governments and the public and private sectors, are essential elements in building healthy populations and these core services include food safety, sanitation, the protection of drinking and recreation water quality, the protection of indoor and outdoor air quality, communicable disease control, tobacco control, vector management, emergency management and disaster preparedness, [IFEH 2011, EMPHASIS, MINE], based on these and many more, today, the world is celebrating 'World Environmental health Day'. It is celebrated in Kano by Environmental Health Forum of Nigeria, in Lagos by Concerned Environmental Health Graduate, and many other organizations in many states.

The celebration was started in 2011, courtesy of International Federation of Environmental Health [IFEH] resolution in Indonesia, which is being observed every September 26. The theme of this year's celebration is 'Emerging Environmental Health Risks and the Challenges for Tomorrow'.

For Nigeria, the emerging environmental health risks are many, but the most priority ones are emerging and re-emerging diseases, food control and hygiene, Water sanitation and hygiene, built environment, environmental health emergencies, oil spillage, electronic waste, increased urbanization, Health, Safety & Environment, [HSE], climate change, open defaecation, and Waste management..

### **Emerging and Re-emerging diseases**

The emerging and re-emerging diseases include cholera, meningitis, poliomyelitis, tuberculosis, measles, lassa fever, malaria and HIV/AIDS. For malaria alone, Nigeria is spending over N132 billion annually in the cost of treatment, prevention, loss of man-hour, etc., and that it accounts for 25% of global malaria cases. The other diseases are also killing Nigerian due to emphasis on curative rather than prevention, which accounts for not only their re-emerging, but becoming endemic in the country.

### **On food control**

Many junk and fast food are increasing daily, which many chemical preservatives, colourants and flavour are added, and the rate of their consumption in is multiplying with its attendant effects on the health of the consumers in causation of cancer, diabetes and others, without regulating our lifestyle, and the ignorance of the public on what to eat, when, how and why, is further increasing the prevalence of many non-communicable disease in the country.

Many food joints and restaurants are not registered with the appropriate environmental health authority, the food handlers are not certified health wise to determine whether or not are fit to handle and process food, many are not accessible, and did not meet the minimum health requirement to operate.

### **Water sanitation and hygiene**

The main sources of water supply in rural areas are boreholes and rivers. In most cases the rivers are contaminated with physical, chemical or biological contaminants due to our actions or inactions, and if drink without proper treatment, the effect on public health is great. Diseases like diarrhea, typhoid fever, dysentery, etc. are associated with such water. Where the water is provided by treatment plants in some cities, in many times, the water is not fully treated to be called 'potable', or if it so, along the way of transmitting it via various pipes networks, it becomes contaminated, can also cause diseases.

### **Built Environment**

Our built environment, majority of our rural areas and some cities are built not in accordance with building regulations which gives room for poor hygiene, overcrowding, over building, collapse, dampness, cracking and others, which adversely affects the occupants health physically, psychologically, physiologically and socially. Built environment should be adequately ventilated, not overbuilt and in tune with health regulations.

### **Environmental health emergencies**

These are occurring daily, from road accidents, flooding; power failures, broken pipes, and blocked roads which can all disrupt water, waste and food-handling services for hours or days. More severe damage to civil engineering structures, from bridges to water mains, can cause disruptions lasting days or weeks. In such a case, contingency plans for temporary repairs and, when necessary, alternative water supplies and sanitation arrangements are required. Here, Environmental health officer comes in handy from evacuation stage, to settlement, treatment, cleanup and the provision of supplies stage.

### **Oil Spillage**

Oil spillage in the Niger Delta is of great concern to the nation as its effects are affecting Nigerian environment by killing birds, contaminating water, damages beaches, kills marine mammals and fish, destroy wildlife habitat and breeding grounds and damage to soil fertility. These and many more give the room for the creation of National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency [NOSDRA].

### **Electronic Waste**

These are discarded electrical or electronic devices and are being shipped to Nigeria in large quantities, majority of which are irreparable junk from phones, refrigerators, computers, television sets, DVD, etc. Their accumulation in an environment pose a great danger to the public ranging from release of airborne dioxins, heavy metals and hydrocarbons and their eventual access to bodies of water, air, which is adversely affecting health. Effects like fetal loss, prematurity, low birthweight, and congenital malformations; abnormal thyroid function and thyroid development; neurobehavioural disturbances; and genotoxicity are associated with electronic waste. Though there is no proper record of the effect of electronic waste in Nigeria, nevertheless, studies elsewhere shows that it increases the level of airborne dioxin, carcinogens, and heavy metals in various environmental media.

### **Urbanization**

Increase urbanization has overstretch the limit our public utilities services can afford to maintain, unemployment, overcrowding, poor plan and layout, lack of sanitation, contaminated source of water supply, air pollution and many more, with their attendant environmental consequences.

### **HSE**

On Health, Safety and Environment, HSE, we look at the risks of diseases, injuries and other working conditions of workers in their various place of work [be it office, industry, factory, etc.], the community where such workers exists such that the activities of the industries, factories or the organization does not pose a danger to the communities. Even though Employer Compensation Act is there to protect workers, nevertheless, many workers are suffering from diseases and injuries related to their works, with little or no changes to their physical, mental and social well being.

### **Climate Change**

Climate change is by far the greatest emerging environmental health risks affecting Nigeria as we are experiencing flooding, drought, extreme heat and rise in temperature, increase insect vectors due to poor sanitation and desert encroachment.

### **Open Defaecation**

Open defaecation is common across the nation, as many houses had no provision of toilets at all, they are at the mercy of open space and bushes closes to them, and the public health problems associated to open defaecation include contamination of water sources via storm runoff, causation of diseases like cholera, poliomyelitis, typhoid, infectious hepatitis, ascariasis, etc. Though a new concept of Community led Total Sanitation [CLTS]-an innovative methodology for mobilizing communities with a view to eradicating open defaecation-is being championed by UNICEF, still much need to be done.

### **Waste management**

By waste management I mean the process of generating, storing, sorting, transporting and disposal of waste, be it solid, liquid, gas in Nigeria is chaotic and being done in many government agencies and private operators by quacks and non-professional. Anywhere you go in Nigeria, the menace of waste is everywhere, which is further making the aesthetic view of cities and towns unattractive, and do drive away foreign investors. Improper waste generation and disposal causes diseases like malaria, cholera, typhoid, infectious hepatitis, contaminates sources of water supplies, attract vector and other insects, and many other avoidable situations. By waste management, it include healthcare waste or medical waste being generated in clinics, hospital, research centres, which its improper management will leads to risks to healthcare practitioners, patients, visitors, waste handlers, and even the community where such health facilities exists, and is generating healthcare waste.

The challenges is for the appropriate authorities from federal, state and local government to give emphasis on environmental health services which centres on protecting and safeguarding the public health through various actions in detecting public health nuisances via premises inspection, surveillance of diseases, registering and certifying food vendors, inspection of treatment of water sources, approval of building in line with health regulations, medical waste management, waste management, pollution control and many more, which will go in a long way to protect our environment.

The non-involvement of environmental health practitioners in key decision affecting health and environment by policy makers, is further making Nigeria going nowhere, as emphasis is placed more on curative treatment, rather than preventive measures, which is not only taking away our scarce resources, but making our environment unattractive to investors, and a breeding places for many avoidable diseases. The earlier we give emphasis on environmental health management solution to these and others problem, and engaging those that matters, the better for us. For 'Your environment, is your Health'.